Culture and Power*

RUSTOM BHARUCHA

Everyone seems to be cashing in on 'culture' these days—activists disillusioned with the economistic and instrumentalist underpinnings of development; religious groups which realize that the art of proselytizing can be enhanced if it is grounded in the symbols and codes of everyday cultural interactions; environmentalists who have sought connections between nature, nurture, and the archetypes of culture in their opposition to the violations of biodiversity and ecocide; and finally policy-makers and administrators who have woken up to the reality that their policies may have failed in the absence of any real cognizance of and respect for the transformative powers of culture.

India's Culture: The State, the Arts and Beyond is one such attempt by an Indian administrator (or "civil servant" as he describes himself) which stakes a claim for 'culture' within the necessities of administration for the larger stability of the State. Before we analyse the power that is embedded within B.P. Singh's absolute faith in administration, it is necessary to dispel any illusion that he is a "distinguished scholar", as described in the attractively designed jacket cover of this book. Not only does Singh himself admit in the preface that his book is an outcome of "18 months" of close involvement with "culture", ostensibly when he was the Culture Secretary to the Government of India, he also acknowledges that "The exclusiveness of such a concern is unprecedented in my life" (xi). While this would seem like a candid admission of the chimerical life of an administrator—Singh has now been appointed as our Home Secretary—we are expected to believe that this "recent mental journey" as documented in the book is an illumination of Singh's "whole being" (ibid.).

There is obviously some kind of hubris and self-mystification at work here. Scholars and researchers have spent their entire lives trying to decipher the multiple strands in "India's Culture" or diverse *cultures*. Increasingly, with growing critical reflexivity, there are acknowledgements of the fragmentation, omissions, gaps, erasures, and the implicitly casteist, sexist, and racist evaluations of 'other' cultures. The most pioneering scholarship today has become at once more tentative and microanalytical. Omniscient overviews of 'Indian culture' are best left to pundits unable to free themselves from the positivist categories of an earlier time.

However, let us acknowledge that some of these pundits have a classical scholarship

*Review-article: B.P. Singh, *India's Culture: The State, The Arts and Beyond*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Rs 425.

that sustains their Himalayan visions of 'Indian culture'. Mr Singh does not have this scholarship. His 41-page encapsulation of "India's Culture" in the opening chapter to his book, encompassing everything from Mohenjodaro, the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, the epics, the six systems of 'philosophy' (Nyaya, Vedanta, etc.), the *Natyashastra*, the *Arthashastra*, Ajanta, Ellora, is not even an adequate paraphrase of derivative scholarship. It is better read as the kind of background material that one gets to read in the more expensive editions of cultural tour guides.

A Tour Guide of Indian Culture

Banality is one of the dominant signs of this touristic discourse: "Kalidasa's *Meghadoota* is a classic of lyrical beauty. Similarly, Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is the greatest work of drama not only of ancient times but of subsequent times as well" (18). That's it for Kalidasa. Along with this breezy hyperbole, there is also an authentication of our glorious past through totally fabricated dates: "By the year AD 1, India was a highly developed culture" (1)—no fuzziness can be tolerated here; likewise, "the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were already a part of the collective Indian consciousness prior to the 8th century BC" (16). What is the verification for these assumed 'facts'? Indeed, what is the epistemology underlying such historicity? What kind of past is being constructed here, and for what purpose?

The overwhelming problem in Singh's 'scholarship' is that he consistently confuses information for facts. This results in a trivialization of assumed knowledge—for example, in a four-sentence paragraph on medicine in the *Atharva Veda*, there is an inexplicable tit-bit interspersed between the perfunctory identifications of Dhanvantari and Charaka in the "20 different types of [surgical] knives and needles and 26 articles of dressing" that were in use by the "first century AD" (34). Clearly, the author is out of his depth here in figuring out an adequate narrative mode in organizing "some facts" to provide "some perspectives".

A judicious selective principle becomes mandatory for any such overview of "India's Culture"—for example, in connection with Singh's obvious devotion to the art of administration, it would have been useful to analyse why the *Arthashastra* emphasizes "the need for a bureaucracy to uphold *dharma*" (35). But this is merely "interesting" for our bureaucrat-scholar, and he lets it pass. Likewise, my own curiosity is whetted when I am reminded that the "Lion Capital", one of the most "remarkable achievements of Mauryan court art", is also the emblem of the Republic of India (25). How exactly did this process of image-making materialize at a conceptual level? How do symbols become emblems? What is the political think-tanking that goes into the retrieval of traditional visual resources in order to create the signs of our times?

If answers to such questions are totally elided in this tour-guide of our cultural traditions, it is because Singh has no critical framework in which to situate his *ad hoc* information. Not only does this result in simplifications but in a falsification of indigenous cultural histories through a grand assimilationist strategy. Thus, the author has no

difficulty in claiming with no elaboration whatsoever that "the fusion between tribal languages and Sanskrit is evident" in states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa (11). Likewise, while the "Tibeto-Burman languages came under the influence of Sanskrit and its two major offshoots, Assamese and Bengali" (ibid.), there is no hint as to how this came about through the cultural colonization of Vaishnavism, among other processes of interculturation.

Perhaps the conceptual vacuum in these details centres around a totally amorphous use of the word 'culture'. Singh informs us in a footnote that he is drawing on definitions of culture provided by Edward Taylor, A.L. Kroeber, Nirmal Kumar Bose, and D.D. Kosambi. The last reference is perhaps the unkindest cut of all, because there is nothing in Singh's cavalier reading of culture to suggest that he has grasped even the elements of the dialectical density of Kosambi, for whom "patterns of culture and ethical values are not mere ideological superstructures of establishing economic relations", but are "historically determined—by the logic of the history of ideas" (42). In the course of his book, Singh attempts to demonstrate a global awareness of culture in relation to the market, science, and the environment in what would appear to be a contemporary history of ideas. Unfortunately, this 'history' is ultimately subsumed within an all-encompassing and ultimately arbitrary reading of culture that is reduced to bureaucratic jargon.

Politics of Cultural Diversity

Singh, of course, is not alone in this political appropriation of 'culture' by policy-makers, whose enthusiasm for the term is matched, unfortunately, by an absence of intellectual rigour in dealing with its multiple dynamics and components. Since the publication of the Unesco report in 1995 on *Our Creative Diversity* prepared by the World Commission on Culture and Development, there is now an official recognition at the highest international level for encouraging "empathy and respect for the entire spectrum of human differences" (75). Suffice it to say that this master-text on culture and development is not free of its own superficialities, euphemisms, and reductions.

In the measured critique of the Unesco document by Arne Martin Klausen (1997), we learn how in the search for a more "holistic" and "synthesising" use of culture to facilitate "trans-sectorial analysis and overall perspectives", there is a problematic conflation of culture and society (to which Raymond Williams had alerted us many years ago). Anchored firmly within "the Unesco tradition of unanimity", *Our Creative Diversity* "elides differences, particularly those relating to a critical analysis of modernity, not only underdevelopment" (Klausen 1997: 29). Confusing the anthropological, cognitive, and sectorial modes of analysing culture, indeed unable to discriminate between "normative" and "descriptive" readings of culture, the Unesco blueprint ultimately succeeds in "inflating" the word to such an extent that it becomes "meaningless and inoperative"—a "fashion[able] sound-bite" (ibid.: 31–32).

In a much less refined discourse than *Our Creative Diversity*, B.P. Singh's musings on "India's Culture" succumb precisely to the same traps of an essentially factitious comprehensiveness. Without so much as questioning the pertinence of the Unesco report to Indian realities, he jumps on to the bandwagon of "diversities". How can we go wrong here?—we have all the statistics in the world to prove that we are the most "diverse" country in the world with 18 official languages, 1700 dialects, 45,000 plant species, etc. Singh uses the Unesco report to claim that the world is looking to India for answers that are likely to emerge from our "5,000 years of uninterrupted civilisation" (76). Barely able to conceal his pride, he promptly goes on to affirm: "Indian cultural unity has successfully tackled problems of political instability and military invasion, social obscurantism and religious bigotry, and has gained renewal at several stages of its history" (ibid.).

Stop right there, Mr Singh. Indian "cultural unity", in so far as it exists today, has certainly not tackled any of these problems: the nation has been politically unstable for quite some time now; our recent nuclear blasts have intensified the possibilities of military invasion; social obscurantism and religious bigotry are rampant. We cannot regard these problems as contemporary aberrations; nor can we mildly chide the laws of Manu, as Singh does, for "formalising inequalities", with the caste system engendering "snobbishness and pride in the higher castes", and "a spirit of inferiority and servility amongst the lower castes" (152). If we were honest enough to confront the atrocities that continue to be inflicted on the marginalized sections of our society, particularly among *dalit* communities—the word 'dalit' does not seem to exist in Singh's political vocabulary—I think we would have to acknowledge how our "cultural unity" has been sustained through an unacknowledged racism.

What is urgently needed in this context is an analysis of the politics of diversity that has sustained the increasingly nationalist myths of our "cultural unity". Unfortunately, this analysis is absent in Singh's tediously familiar reiteration of statist platitudes. Contrasting what he describes as a "segmented view of culture" with a "composite" one, Singh does not elaborate at all on the two primary sources of segmentation—"religion" and "region" (48). While communalism is fleetingly glossed in the course of the book—no mention, of course, of the Babri Masjid demolition or the riots in Mumbai—there is no analysis of how religion can function as a source of divisiveness rather than diversity. In this regard, Singh simply falls prey to the deeply internalized notion of "pre-formed, sealed religious communities", as Kumkum Sangari (1995) indicates in her exemplary analysis of the politics of diversity. Pre-ordained by birth and transmitted across generations, these "religious diversities" are invariably divested of "internal diversity, looseness, and open boundaries" (Sangari 1995: 3300). Sequestered from "regional and class variations", they need to be interrelated, as Sangari would insist, with specific histories of social disparity and patriarchy, which produce diversities in their own right.

Without intervening in this contentious debate, Singh totally avoids taking any position

on the contradictory dynamics of religion, culture, and the rights of citizenship. Likewise, there is no historical perspective whatsoever in his book on how *regional* cultural identities emerged through—and against—the mechanisms of the State. Here it would be imperative to examine the almost unanimous acceptance of linguistic cultural identities during the freedom movement, which became increasingly more complicated after independence, with different linguistic groups seeking distinct state identities and formations. Such was the chauvinist intensity of these linguistic demands that Nehru himself was compelled to acknowledge as early as 1960 in the Lok Sabha: "We live in a closed society—not one closed society, but numerous closed societies. There is a Bengali closed society, a Marathi closed society, a Malayali closed society, and so on" (quoted in Nag 1993:1527).

Instead of dealing with the increasing provocations of regionalism, Singh falls back predictably enough on a vague, woolly, sentimental notion of "composite culture", which he compares to "bee activity" (48). Just as it is impossible to "separate the specific contribution of each flower or plant" in the transformation of nectar into honey, India's diverse cultures are composite. At best, the "variations of Indian cultural honey" taste differently according to the local variations in environment, climate, and language (49). Typically, Singh uses the words 'composite' and 'pluralist' synonymously, revealing his intellectual laziness in failing to discriminate between even the most vital terms in cultural discourse today.

A little later in the book, however, Singh does inflect his seemingly unequivocal faith in the plurality of "India's Culture" by acknowledging the "fears" about "Hindi-isation" and "Assamisation", which will continue to "haunt sections of our people and will continue until plurality takes firm roots" (66). I welcome this qualification, but I would also need some explanation as to why plurality has not taken firm roots in Indian soil. The marxist scholar Javeed Alam once suggested that while "tradition" within a society can be marked by diversity, "pluralism" is a "post-enlightenment result born of struggles for democracy" (Alam 1994: 24). Unfortunately, there is no such conceptual intervention in Singh's freewheeling reading of 'diversity', 'composite culture', and 'plurality', which simply become interchangeable catchwords, frustrating any possibility of theoretical illumination.

The sheer confusion of Singh's position becomes only too obvious in the arbitrariness of his thought process, which has not been assisted in any way by the sloppy editing of the manuscript's numerous redundancies and abrupt transitions. At one point, for instance, Singh quotes Gandhi's famous statement: "I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house . . . ", which would seem to provide the foundations for "India's cultural policy" (66). In the next paragraph, there is a list of fourteen "first-rank leaders of the freedom struggle" (67). This is followed by a quotation decontextualized from the historian Ravinder Kumar's discriminations between "Civilisation-State" and "Nation State". And finally, when Singh commits himself to making his own statement on

plurality, this is what he has to say:

> [T]he approach to culture in India *must* positively encourage regional diversity and not just tolerate it. No region or group *should* have the feeling of a threat of being swamped. There *are* no 'majority' and 'minority' cultures.
>
> (ibid.: my emphases)

The first statement is cast in an imperative mode; the second is more paternalistic; the third is essentialist. From 'must' to 'should' to 'are': this is how the grammar of administrative discourse functions, from a declaration that a problem can and must be resolved to the acknowledgement that there is no real problem in the first place.

Strategizing the National Culture Fund

If Singh is not theoretically prepared to take on conceptual issues relating to the politics of diversity and plurality, one would expect him to handle the bureaucratic nitty-gritty of cultural institutions with more authority. But apart from an extensive historical survey of the Archaeological Survey of India—which unaccountably includes *nine* pages of documents relating to the early priorities of the ASI in 1862—there is no critical reading of the leading cultural institutions in the country. At one point, Singh merely lists the early pioneering initiatives of Santiniketan, the Kerala Kalamandalam, the Uday Shankar Culture Centre at Almora, the Indian People's Theatre Association, the Madras Music Academy, but he does not address them at all. This evasion of critical accountability also extends to his perfunctory account of post-independence institutions like the Akademis, the National School of Drama, and the Zonal Cultural Centres, which are merely endorsed with the mildly critical comments of High Powered Committees led by P.N. Haksar and U.R. Ananthamurthy.

Apart from this totally inexplicable absence of any analysis of the inner workings of these institutions, Singh avoids any dialogue (or debate) with contemporary Indian artists. I fail to see in this regard how he can presume to include "the Arts" in the subtitle of his book when he does not really deal with them except through scandals like the recent administrative crisis in the Lalit Kala Akademi (which Singh attributes a little too self-righteously to the "moral breakdown of its leadership"); controversies relating to State art purchases, such as the Brunner paintings (through which Singh somewhat overstates the transparency of Nehru in accepting the critical views of art experts); and the smuggling of art objects (which is cast in the mode of a "veritable crime thriller" as Singh traces the "odyssey" of the Nataraja of Sivapuram from Tamil Nadu to New York). Unfortunately, these are relatively marginal, if not sensational events, that do not really tackle the ideological bankruptcy and bureaucracy of State institutions in their routine modes of operation. Instead of eliciting a debate on administrative procedures with cultural analysts and practitioners, Singh incorporates the views of just one contemporary Indian artist—the "sensitive" Mallika Sarabhai, whose perspective on "corporate social responsibility"

(61) is obviously compatible with the one institution that Singh is prepared to deal with at length—the National Culture Fund.

As the originator of the very idea of the Fund and the President of its Executive Committee, Singh has obvious stakes here which are substantiated with a pragmatic, though not particularly inventive, managerial strategy. The *raison d'être* for the Fund comes from the reality that "there is a need to look for [financial] support [for the arts] from outside" (71)—in other words, outside the sanctified boundaries of the State, which Nehru and Maulana Azad had legitimized in the 1950s as the only appropriate source of funding culture in post-colonial India. Not only was the feudal bankruptcy of more traditional sources of patronage considered inappropriate for a modern society, it was also assumed that the market was too undeveloped, unpredictable, and philistine to provide support for the arts.

Times have changed. For all his loyalties to the Nehruvian legacy, Singh is now prepared to re-think the creative possibilities of corporate sponsorship and the positive effects of commercialism. Even in the more ruthless world of the global economy, he acknowledges that "Commerce also has a neutralising effect on violent behaviour since commerce facilitates prosperity and this, in turn, would give people a stake in peace" (123). While this speciously deductive logic does not receive any elaboration, Singh is more convincing when he uses statistics to prove that external support for the arts is critically needed for their sustenance. We are informed in this regard that the total budget allotted for the cultural sector in the 8th Five Year Plan was Rs 800 crores, which amounts to a mere "0.19 per cent of the total plan outlay of the Government of India" (70). While this is undeniably shameful, one wonders why Singh and his colleagues do not use their clout within the government to raise the cultural budget to at least 1% of the total plan. Instead, we find him justifying a Fund whose models are to be found in the U.S. and Britain, which have totally different corporate structures, and indeed, a culture of 'business philanthropy' that cannot be sustained within the present economic uncertainties of Indian corporations, industries, and business houses.

Instead of confronting the hard facts of our economy, Singh allows himself to be seduced by the rhetoric of First World funding policies, which would like to privatize cultural capital in a seeming marginalization of the State (which, of course, has the total sanction of the State itself). Now the "onus" is no longer on the government to provide administrative and financial assistance for culture-related activities; now what matters are "inter-institution partnerships for mobilising extra-budgetary resources for culture" (72). Not only does Singh envision an intermediary role for the State administration between the public and private sectors, he also advocates an advisory intervention in the creation of new "service structures" for the existing national institutions representing archaeology, museology, anthropology, and the archives.

Thus, what is being envisioned here is an expansion of administrative capacities that

totally overlooks the questionable expertise of its personnel. In addition, Singh seems totally sanguine about the cultural and ethical implications involved in allowing donors from the corporate world to determine the kinds of projects that they would like to fund. Tax benefits, to my mind, should not legitimize corporate aesthetic standards. Despite the recent facades of Indian foundations in conscientizing the cultural norms of the business world, there should be no doubts about its preference for glitz and spectacle—gala events structured around cricket, horse-racing, fashion, and beauty competitions rather than experiments in art.

The Spectacle of Politics

Spectacle cannot be dismissed in the cultural politics of any administration, which assumes that culture must be visible in order to have an impact in public life. Thus, we find Singh totally enamoured by the scale and prestige of the Festival of India and the Republic Day Parade. Rhapsodizing on the former, he has the nerve to celebrate festivals precisely on the grounds for which they have been criticized by a wide range of artists and writers. Totally ignoring the political agendas of these mega-events, Singh would have us believe that the Festival of India was designed to *dispel* the stereotype of India as a "romantic and exotic land of maharajas, tigers, snake-charmers, the Taj Mahal, and of course, grinding poverty" (55).

Firstly, one would need to acknowledge that if orientalist stereotypes were eliminated by the Festival of India, they were also replaced by another set of stereotypes that packaged the diversities of India and its timeless folk wisdom within a neo-colonial framework of the modern nation-state. Secondly, there must be something seriously wrong in Singh's understanding of the stereotype if he is able to place "snake-charmers" *alongside* "grinding poverty". Surely poverty is the dominant reality of our country, which places us 138th in the list of the world's nations (this is one statistic that Singh needs to remember). The stereotype is not poverty, but the *erasure of poverty*, which enables festivals to cast their synthetic and extremely transitory spells on "enthusiastic crowds", whose sensitization to Indian "folk traditions" and contribution to the tourist traffic—the assumedly positive kickbacks of festivals—can be more accurately read as a wish-fulfilment on the part of the Indian bureaucracy.

"When the festival ends", all that the organizers can do is to "disappear", as Pupul Jayakar puts it poetically,"into the night" (56). But has anyone in the Department of Culture cared to find out what happens to the folk practitioners when they return to their villages? Has there been any study on the effects of festivals within inter/intra-regional sectors and communities identified with particular performative skills? What are the structures of dialogue *and translation* prepared by the government to initiate meetings between performers across the differences and hierarchies of class, caste, religion, and language? The truth is that the organizers are primarily interested in mounting a spectacle

with maximum media attention; what happens at human and psychological levels to people within and outside the framework of the festival is of no concern.

A more formal process of dehumanization is at work in the Republic Day Parade, but Singh fails to see it in his total endorsement of the nationalist *raison d'être* of the spectacle. Here one encounters the most blatant instrumentalization of culture that has its roots in the liberal vision of a post-independence political elite, who imagined that the young Republic of India could score over more developed nations in its capacity to combine a "ceremonial military parade" with a "cultural pageant" (as Ashfaque Husain, the Joint Secretary of the Department of Education had emphasized in his 1952 correspondence with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad). There is a quality of quaintness in these recommendations: while Azad referred approvingly to the pageants in the Parade as a "Cultural Caravan" (96), Husain went one step further in affirming that this "*beau geste*" (95) should impress not only the foreign dignitaries but the masses of India.

Nehru was at once enthusiastic, and yet restrained, in his recommendation that the Parade should emphasize the "civilian" aspects of contemporary Indian society (97). But he was also insistent, on General Cariappa's suggestion, that "folk dances" should be presented, "more especially by tribal people from . . . the North-East, the Nagas, etc." (ibid.). He also suggested that some of these folk dances could be presented "on a small scale" at the Rashtrapati Bhavan party on the day following the Parade. It is hard not to read an implicit condescension in these recommendations, which can also be traced in the critical comments recorded by Nehru in his immediate response to the 1952 Republic Day Parade:

> The first part of [the pageant] depicting what is called 'Youth and Progress' appeared to be merely an array of people holding up placards. There was nothing artistic or impressive about it . . .
>
> Maharashtra was good, but too long drawn out. Lezim fits in with a procession, but Malkhamb does not. Having boxing and the like was rather out of place . . . The UP Ramlila was feeble. It was just a crowd sitting in a truck.
>
> (93)

While Singh emphasizes that nothing escaped Nehru's "discerning eye", I think one needs to question what was meeting the eye in the first place. When you say "Maharashtra was good", there is an incredible reductionism at work here that has been totally normalized in our official cultural discourse. Firstly, there is an entity called Maharashtra that has been determined by a certain hegemonic structure of values and associations; it is equated with a particular culture; this culture is reduced to a tableau with performative accessories; and the ingredients of this performativity are specifically aligned to folk forms—hence it becomes possible for Nehru to say that Lezim works, Malkhamb does not. Even within the hermeneutics of official pageantry, one cannot help being troubled here by the assumptions not only of critical discrimination and taste, but of what is being made of people in a forum that values "cultural progress no less than military strength" (95).

If this would seem like an overly fastidious reading of what is after all a parade, I would draw Singh's attention to the invaluable documentation of the First Drama Seminar organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1956, where the most distinguished participants including Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, V. Raghavan, Mulk Raj Anand, Sombhu Mitra, Balraj Sahni, among other luminaries, had expressed their distress about the vulgarity and money wasted on the Republic Day Parade. While the immediate source of the provocation was the modernized dress of a Kuchipudi performance in the Parade, the actual circumstances of arranging the performance, as pointed out by Nataraj Ramakrishna in the Drama Seminar, were even more objectionable:

> The most unfortunate part of it is that none of us in *Kuchipudi* knew that a troupe was being organised to participate in the Republic Day Parade celebrations. The official who was entrusted to organise could not contact [the] right persons but he wanted to prove his efficiency. He gathered together persons who did not know their art and thought that modern costumes would give them dignity in the capital of India. There was nobody to tell them that they would look clownish in modern costumes.
>
> (n.d.: 322–323)

At this point in the discussion, the irrepressible Dina Gandhi had intervened—her voice comes through the dusty pages of the Seminar—by saying: "We need not waste our time over the follies of officials and artists. It is a tragedy that this world cannot be got rid of fools" (ibid.: 323).

The fools are still around. If we cannot get rid of them, we have to question the *raison d'être* of their folly. Today we still continue to celebrate the Republic Day Parade in more or less the same form as its early explorations. The form has now congealed; it is time to re-work it by questioning its conceptual, political, and choreographic ingredients. Watch out for the Parade next year. No consolation prizes for not guessing the main theme: Nuclear Peace. I can see a large cut-out of the Buddha floating down Raj Path, perhaps surrounded by a phalanx of saffron flags, followed by nuclear missiles which, hopefully, will not be too authentic. The dummies will do.

"Culture is Power"

These perversions of our times, however, should not prevent us from confronting the limitations, prejudices, and blind spots of the past. This is precisely what Singh refuses to do. On the one hand, he fails to acknowledge the lacunae in the Nehruvian legacy, but he also scrupulously avoids any comment on the cultural politics of post-Ayodhya India. In this vacuum, he has no other choice but to hold on to the eternalist chimera of "India's Culture" that will surely go on forever: "The change in [the] political complexion of governments or a cabinet crisis within government never made any significant impact on our cultural freedom" (68). While there is a passing reference in the book to "the dark clouds of the Emergency" (xvi), there is not a word on the ideology of Hindutva, or on the

political censorship, if not attack on ostensibly anti-Hindu/anti-Indian art by the self-appointed judiciary of the Shiv Sena and the hoodlums of the Bajrang Dal. I fail to understand how a book dealing with "the State" in relation to culture can be so ignominiously silent on the subject of violence that is increasingly legitimized by the agencies of the State itself. This silence makes a mockery of Singh's faith in India's eternal "cultural freedom".

One way of getting out of the problem is to place culture beyond politics in a zone of ethical, human values—a civilizational space grounded in the moral principles of the Buddha and Gandhi. Predictably Singh gravitates in this direction in his search for "the new millenium" through some "quotable quotes": Vaclav Havel's faith in "the spirit of multicultural coexistence" (137); the Buddha's conversation with Ananda on the democratic order represented by the Vijjians (139–140); Nadine Gordimer testifying that "the only true spiritual advance that has been offered is the thinking of Mahatma Gandhi" (140); the Nobel Laureate Wislawa Szymborska's poem 'The Century's Decline', which dares to ask: "How should we live?" (141). Needless to say, there are no critical interventions here, but a carefully constructed drift, into what would appear to be a graceful conclusion: India, Singh reassures us, may well provide an answer to Szymborska's question in its message and practice that "happiness lies in leading a simpler life, a life with the family and within the community, and a life of sharing with others. This would be possible in terms of the Indian genius, as expressed by the Buddha, and by Mahatma Gandhi" (142).

As a conclusion, this is harmless enough and one cannot help feeling that perhaps this administrator has a heart. But in the opening sentences of Appendix A on 'Culture and Administration', which is a chapter in its own right, one receives a rude shock as the real B.P. Singh stands up for what he is; indeed, his "whole being" as the Administrator is clearly spelled out with no equivocations whatsoever:

> Culture is power . It is a pursuit of total perfection to know all that concerns us most.
> (146)

A more violent and arrogant statement, following the names of Gandhi and the Buddha in the previous chapter, would be hard to imagine. For these seers, culture is *not* power: it is a doctrine of love, self-respect, compassion, and sharing. As for the "pursuit of total perfection", it would be an illusion that they would humorously set aside for the deeper quest of self-realization. A respect for imperfection is what we need to pursue in this world, not the blind alley of perfection, which makes Singh affirm not once but twice in the course of his book that "India is one of the few countries in the world today which can claim that it has more than a hundred creative persons who are the world's best in their respective fields" (54,114). And yet, he is peeved about the fact that while there can be the "world's best tennis player" and the "world's best chess player", there is no "world's best tabla player" or the "world's best Odissi dancer" (78). Such ludicrous global

aspirations can only reveal the pathetic state of our national self-confidence.

Following the dictum that "culture is power", Singh proceeds to affirm the ethos of administration:

> Administration keeps the fabric of society *intact*. It is the *tool* of the state to achieve its goal. It is an *instrument* of *ordering* human relations to help individuals in developing their individuality and a consistent, *coherent* personality . . . Administrative machinery is entrusted with the responsibility of keeping *order* in a society without which there would be *anarchy* and human life would be *solitary, poor, nasty, brutish,* and *short*.
>
> (146, my emphases)

From Gandhi and Buddha, we have obviously entered the vicious, power-ridden, dog-eat-dog world of Hobbes, in which the only salvation lies in a state of *order*, without which there would be *anarchy*. Clearly, this is a dichotomized vision of the world, which fails to account for the violence embedded in the technologies of administration itself.

If we think that this is enough, we are mistaken. Not content to merely stand up for his cause, Singh is prepared to defend it on the very grounds for which it is attacked by a growing number of activists and concerned citizens.

> [A]dministration . . . has to respond to the people's hopes and aspirations. But there are *countervailing forces* seeking to *perpetuate the status quo*, to prevent the administration from coming closer to the people and becoming a partner in their march towards progress. What are these forces and how best can they be *neutralised?* What is their role in creating and sustaining a *false dichotomy* between an elitist administration and rural-oriented 'barefoot' administration?
>
> (157)

The sheer mendacity and coercive power of this language reveal why government officials are so deeply distrusted by people at large. That "countervailing forces" (read: social action groups, citizenship and civil society initiatives, people's movements) should be accused of "perpetuating the status quo" is a preposterous reversal of why these forces are up in arms in the first place—to break the status quo of anti-people statism and bureaucracy.

It is not the "countervailing forces" that are coming in between the State and the people; the mechanisms of the State are insensitive to and insufficiently interactive in dealing with the needs of the people in the first place. The "false dichotomy", therefore, is being constructed by Singh himself to cover up the failure, if not bankruptcy, of his own administration at many critical levels. Finally, I would have imagined that the very idea of "neutralising" dissent is symptomatic of a kind of totalitarian threat that we could do without in a seemingly democratic society. But then, how democratic is our democracy in India today? How does it get legitimized through the manufacture of consent perpetrated

by the agencies of the State? And how is it sustained by the status quo that would like to challenge the increasingly corrupt system on earlier liberal grounds, but is unable to do so through its very complicities in the system itself?

This, I believe, is the 'good' administrator's dilemma in India today. But it is our dilemma as well as citizens and artists, who would like a radical questioning of the norms and premises that underlie the support of the arts, so that it can be democratized for the good of society. How would the agencies for such a democratization of the arts consolidate their efforts? In attempting to formulate some strategy of action, I am reminded of a prescient statement made by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in the First Drama Seminar:

> The Administrative machinery works in a peculiar way. Again and again I hear, not only in this Seminar but also outside it, how nice it would be to have a Ministry of Culture. God forbid, if such a thing happens there will be an end of all cultural activities in this country . . . A ministry is a ministry and as such, it will have to go through so many formalities and procedures . . . [N]o cultural activity can be carried on by a ministry. All the time they will be busy in collecting data, statistics, blue-prints, and hundred and one theories. That is the way they work and sow seeds of discontent.
>
> (n.d: 357)

We do not as yet have a Ministry of Culture in India, but the existing administrative procedures made in the name of promoting culture by the State have produced a very deep and unsettling state of discontent for citizens at large, and for artists in particular. B.P. Singh's book can be read against the grain of its pseudo-punditry and half-baked 'Indian' philosophy as an unwittingly candid exposition as to why this discontent exists in the first place *through its very refusal to address it.* In the final analysis, the book does not leave me with anger but with a deep sense of shame that the culture of the State in India can be reflected so abysmally—yet accurately—in the bankrupt state of its administration.

REFERENCES

Alam, Javeed. 'Tradition in India under Interpretive Stress', *Thesis Eleven*, No. 39, 1994.

Klausen, Arne Martin. 'Our Creative Diversity: Critical Comments on Some Aspects of the World Report', *Our Creative Diversity—A Critical Perspective*, international conference organised by the Norwegian National Committee of the World Decade for Cultural Development, Lillehammer, September 5–7, 1997.

Nag, Sajal. 'Multiplication of Nations? Political Economy of Sub-Nationalisms in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 17–24, 1993.

Sangari, Kumkum. 'Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 23 and 30, 1995.

All references to the First Drama Seminar conducted by the Sangeet Natak Akademi are taken from the detailed printed documentation of its lectures and discussions, which have yet to be edited and published.